

THE
ICELANDIC
LUTHERAN
SYNOD

1885-1935

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LUTHERAN
SYNOD

Survey and Interpretation

By

REV. K. K. OLAFSON

1885-1935

Foreword

THIS pamphlet is published under the auspices of the Jubilee Committee, elected by the Icelandic Lutheran Synod to superintend the special activities connected with the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Synod. Appointed by the committee Rev. K. K. Olafson, of Seattle, Wash., president of the Synod, has written this book.

It ought to supply a need in giving to English readers for the first time anything that approaches a full survey of the history and of the spirit of our Synod. We hope that it may be a source of inspiration to our young people. We also hope that it may be a real guide to all those who would like to be informed about our work.

R. MARTEINSSON,
Chairman, Jubilee Committee

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REV. JON BJARNASON, D.D.
President of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod
1885 - 1908

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I. SETTLEMENT AND BEGINNINGS

A GREAT MIGRATION

ONE of the greatest migration movements in history took place during the nineteenth century. One major portion of this was a mass movement of population from the countries of Europe to the American continent. Like most significant movements in history this migration can be traced to a number of causes: political, social, and psychological. At a fateful point they converge to overcome the inertia of conservatism, which always tends to keep things as they are. So often it seems all but inevitable that man must submit tamely to the pressure of circumstances and allow his life to be moulded by them. Here was a bold declaration in action that man could and should shape life to his needs and service. It was a resurgence of that spirit of adventure and creativeness, which is always latent in humanity and when released opens up an endless vista of possibilities in every field and sphere.

The vital character of this migratory movement is evident in its power to spread. It had its roots back in the period of the first explorations and colonization, and it eventually disseminated its influence to every nation and clime. It gripped the imagination and aroused men's deepest instincts, as well as appealing to thought and reason. The courageous outlook of those who responded was not justified by mere cool calculation but rather by faith in life and in the guidance of Providence. Man was being beckoned onward by forces that go beyond thought and reason.

Although isolated and far removed from the lanes of international movements the small Icelandic nation on its volcanic island up by the Arctic circle was soon reached by the same urge that was stirring the other nations. In due time it became as powerful and influential there as elsewhere, although the results were in proportion to the population, which then numbered about 75,000 souls. There were local conditions that affected the migration, but they were rather the occasion than the cause of releasing the outward surging tide of a world movement whose roots stood deep in desire for freedom and a fuller life.



REV. HANS THORGRIMSEN

**Who issued the call to Icelandic Lutheran Congregations
to form a Synod.**

OUTLINE OF ICELANDIC IMMIGRATION

Prior to 1870 there had been two rather fantastic emigration movements from Iceland to the American continents. One was brought on by Mormon missionaries from Utah, who persuaded a small group to accept their faith and to remove themselves to the promised land. This was soon a closed chapter. The other was to Brazil. The tropics were luring the arctic. Enthusiasm ran high and a sizeable movement seemed imminent. Actually the result was small, and the venture proved abortive from the very beginning. But these exotic movements were indicative of the deep stirrings of the time, even though the first responses led into blind alleys. After 1870 a continuing outlet was found, resulting in a more or less sporadic stream of immigration to Canada and the United States up to the beginning of the Great War. Then a definite finis is written.

Small groups of single men led the way. In 1873 the first contingent of families crossed the Atlantic. There seems to have been no definite objective before setting out. The trail had not been blazed in any way and the first groups had little realistic or dependable information as to what would face them on the journey or in the New World. Mostly they were unencumbered with earthly goods. Reaching haphazard destinations, few of them had means of subsistence except for a few days unless they were able to connect up with remunerative employment. Only a scattered few were able to understand or use even the most limited English vocabulary. Thus were supplied the elements for highly adventurous experiences. The outcome fell in no way short of what imagination might anticipate. The first rendezvous were in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and in Muskoka and Kinmount, Ont. But these were only temporary abiding places. Naturally there was much divergence of opinion as to the most favorable locations for Icelandic settlements. Suggestions ranged from Alaska to New Brunswick. Some from the Ontario groups found their way to Nova Scotia, where a colony was founded in 1875, only to be disbanded again in a few years. When the later centres of Icelandic population in Manitoba, Dakota, and Minnesota had been established, Eastern Canada was drained of its Icelandic population.

Similarly on the American side of the international boundary, the movement of population was mainly westward. A permanent settlement on Washington Island in Lake Michigan was the lone exception. This, however, remained isolated and did not affect the common history. Temporary settlements of a few years' duration were made in Shawano

county in Wisconsin and in Nebraska, with a scattering elsewhere. In 1875 and thereafter the permanent settlement in the middle west begin to take form in Lyon county, Minnesota, (1875; spreading later to Lincoln and Yellow Medicine counties); in the Lake Winnipeg region in Manitoba (1875); in Pembina county, Dakota, (1878); and in the Municipality of Argyle in Manitoba (1881). The City of Winnipeg became the permanent centre of gravity and soon harbored a large colony. In these localities the bulk of the Icelandic population is to be found at the time of the organization of the Icelandic Synod in 1885. Later new communities are formed in the Lake Manitoba region, in the City of Selkirk, in Saskatchewan, Alberta, out on the Pacific coast, and elsewhere. With 5,000 to 6,000 Icelanders in Winnipeg at present, the centre of population has remained unchanged. Of late years there has been an increasing diffusion. The latest census of the United States shows that people of Icelandic descent are found in all but four states. In Canada the dispersion is no doubt equally complete. A constantly growing number has been drawn from the rural communities to the urban centres.

GROUP SOLIDARITY - CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS

There were momentous decisions to be made by the Icelandic group upon its settlement in America. What should be their relation to their national culture and to the religious heritage of the homeland? These were the two major loyalties that the immigrants brought with them into the lands of their adoption. Instinctively almost they shrank from forsaking them. This does not mean that they were insensitive to the new claims and duties. But they chose in the main to retain a group solidarity and to make their entry into the national life here without forsaking the background of their national and religious culture. That a wise choice was made, has been abundantly confirmed in experience. Had they at once sought obliteration as a group, they would largely have been assimilated with the more ignorant and uncultured element of their adopted countries. They avoided also the danger attending the quick up-rooting of a deep-seated loyalty, which usually results in a shallow attachment in the new relations. Both in Canada and the United States they have in spite of their group solidarity entered fully into the national life and won for themselves a respected place in the sun. It is almost axiomatic that a group of cultural orphans, severed from the background of centuries and unattached until new backgrounds are built up laboriously through long periods, does not make for stability but constitutes a real danger in the process of amalgamation. The group assimilation stresses

that not only must the immigrants receive the best that America has to offer, but they must also contribute the best that they have brought with them. Cultural units with a variety of backgrounds have served an important purpose in forming the national cultures of America. They have also provided a natural and wholesome transition for the immigrants. Almost unconsciously the Icelandic group has striven for maintaining its identity, and intelligent leadership has done much to fortify and interpret the natural trend.

Their attachment to their religious faith was both conscious and inherent. They came out of a State Church, it is true, and we are apt to associate such legalized religion rather with the external than the intimate characteristics of Christianity. Still these people showed, when the props of the State Church had been removed on their departure from the homeland, that they possessed a personal religious faith that gave them great support in their bold adventures. The correspondence of that period between members of families and friends reveals a simple confidence in God and a reality of religious experience that reflects credit upon the religious training of the homeland. It seems that the fatalistic trend of the saga period had been transformed into a Christianized sense of destiny. In entire accord with their desire and intention to establish communities of their own, was their early planning to maintain the Church of their fathers in the New World. The immigration during the first years seems almost without exception to have been deeply imbued with religion. This afforded fertile ground for the first efforts at organization. Neither was there lacking strong leadership on the part of pioneer clergymen and laymen.

RELIGIOUS BEGINNINGS

The first public religious service of this immigration took place in Milwaukee in connection with the celebration of the millennial of the discovery of Iceland, August 2, 1874. The officiating clergyman was the Rev. Jon Bjarnason, the first ordained minister to emigrate from Iceland to America. This first service marks the beginnings of religious effort among the Icelanders in America. Preached by the man who was destined to be the outstanding religious and cultural leader of his people until his death in 1914, the sermon on this occasion struck the keynote of the development for the years to come. It was a strong expression of faith in and faithfulness to the religious and cultural values of the race, with a clear realization that the demands of the new surroundings and faithfulness to new loyalties, required above all things personal and group faithfulness to the values already posses-

sed. It was on this basis that the sainted leader carried on his great work for his people - a work that has been justified by its fruits as well as by the universal esteem in which his memory is held by his people.

The second pioneer clergyman of the Icelandic immigration was the Rev. Pall Thorlaksson (died 1882). He came to America, a young college graduate, in 1872. He soon made intimate contact with the already vigorous Norwegian Synod in America. He may have had the ministry in view while pursuing his studies in Iceland, but it is clear that a determining impetus to his choice was given by his deep interest in and admiration for the active church life that he found among the Norwegian brethren. He was a gifted and magnetic young man with a great capacity for enthusiasm. Unhesitatingly he cast his lot with the Lutheranism he found here. He was the first minister of Icelandic descent to receive his theological training in America. He studied at the theological seminary of the Missouri Synod at St. Louis, the Norwegians having no seminary of their own at this time. He was graduated in 1875. In the persons of these two pioneer pastors, one with a purely Icelandic background and the other with an Icelandic background modulated by contact and training in America, are typified the elements that have shaped the life of the Icelandic Church on this continent. The mingling, amalgamation, and conflict of these elements has constituted in a large measure the most fundamental problem in the life of the church.

The first Icelandic congregation in America was organized in the Shawano county settlement by the Rev. Pall Thorlaksson. He was then in the service of the Norwegian Synod and his aim was to align the Icelanders with that body. Thus the first impetus to organization came from an American Church, mediated through the personality of an Icelander greatly concerned about the welfare of his people. A similar contact was made in Nova Scotia with the General Council of the Lutheran Church through the person of the late Rev. Luther D. Roth, who visited the Icelandic settlement, ministered to the people in Word and Sacrament through an interpreter and effected a loose church organization. As noted before, neither of these settlements became permanent. The future church history took its course in the later settlements in the Middle West.

The first of these to take active steps toward organization and securing a ministry was the Lake Winnipeg settlement, known as New Iceland. The two pioneer pastors already referred to, came under consideration. Thorlaksson was in

the active ministry, and the Norwegian Synod was willing to aid him in his work among his people. Bjarnason was editor of a Norwegian paper in Minneapolis, but it was believed he would respond to the call of his people. A division ensued. Some preferred a man with purely Icelandic background to one definitely aligned with the Norwegian Synod, which seemed to many of Icelandic temperament more rigorous than the traditional attitude of their own church. Others reversed the argument and preferred the American connection. No agreement could be reached. Both men were called and both accepted. They arrived a month apart in the fall of 1877. A group of congregations in the same community was served by each. These groups were the first beginnings of a general organization. A period of bitter controversy ensued. The moderation of the pastors was not always observed by the followers.



REV. B. B. JONSSON, D.D.
President of the Synod 1908-1921

A quickly changing scene brought about new situations. Most of the people in Thorlaksson's congregations moved to Pembina county in Dakota, and he with them. He died at Mountain in 1882. His memory is revered as an unselfish and heroic pioneer pastor, who founded that settlement and gave his life and strength unstintingly for his people. Many of Bjarnason's flock also dispersed. In 1880 he left for Iceland after ordaining the Rev. Halldor Briem to be his successor. The embers of the New Iceland controversy had opportunity to cool. In 1882 the Rev. Briem left for Iceland also, after serving more or less in all the main centres except Dakota. Again the Icelandic settlements were left without pastoral leadership. This was remedied the following year, when the Rev. H. B. Thorgrimsen accepted a call to Mountain. He was a Luther College (Norwegian) graduate, and theologically trained in St. Louis. Furthermore the Rev. Jon Bjarnason returned from Iceland in 1884, having accepted a call from the congregation in Winnipeg. Other communities having organ-

ized congregations were New Iceland, Municipality of Argyle, and the Minnesota settlements. And only two ministers. The urgency of planning for the whole group was resting heavily upon the leaders of that day.



REV. N. S. THORLAKSSON
President of the Synod 1921-1923

II. ORGANIZATION AND EARLY HISTORY OF SYNOD

ORGANIZATION

THE first steps toward actual organization of a Synod were taken by the Rev. H. B. Thorgrimsen in the fall of 1884. Delegates from the congregations he served in Pembina county met at Mountain at his instigation to consider possibilities. A committee headed by the Rev. Thorgrimsen was elected at this meeting to approach other Icelandic Lutheran congregations in the matter of organization. This committee carried out its instructions, and the result was that duly accredited representatives of seven congregations and one community, where a congregation existed in fact rather than form, held a meeting at Mountain January 23 to 25, 1885. The two pastors had conferred in the meantime. Four main Icelandic communities were represented; Dakota, Winnipeg, Municipality of Argyle, and New Iceland. A constitution was approved for submission to the congregations, the only article of contention being the suffrage of women in the church. It is of interest historically to note that the Icelandic Synod was the first Lutheran organization on the American continent to accord to women the right to vote and hold office in the church, including the privileges of being elected delegates to synod. The confessional basis included the three Ecumenical Creeds, Luther's Small Catechism, and the Augsburg Confession.

The approved constitution was now submitted to the individual congregations. They were instructed to notify the Rev. Jon Bjarnason of the result. He, in turn, was authorized to convene the first synodical meeting in Winnipeg in June the same year. In the intervening period twelve congregations approved the constitution. At this synod, which convened June 24, the organization was completed by the election of officers. The Rev. Jon Bjarnason was elected the first president, being annually re-elected to the office until 1908, when he withdrew. The first secretary was Mr. Fridjon Frederickson, and treasurer Mr. Arni Frederickson. The full official name of the Synod is: "The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America". By common consent in this age of brevity a sufficient translation of the Icelandic name has been found in the title: "The Icelandic Lutheran Synod".

PROBLEMS AND CONDITIONS

The formation of the Synod, which aimed to unite the scattered congregations into a fellowship for mutual strengthening and combined effort, promised much for the future. But it did not solve immediate problems. During the very

year when the Synod was launched, the Rev. H. B. Thorgrimsen accepted a call from a Norwegian parish, which was left vacant by the untimely death of his brother-in-law. The loss of this young and accomplished pastor, who had planned so well for his people, was deeply felt. President Bjarnason then comprised in his own person the entire ministerium of the Synod. In such a state, much depended on the laymen, and it was their unflagging zeal that preserved many of the congregations from disintegration, while pastoral re-inforcements were awaited. Throughout the history of the Synod, the prominence of laymen in its deliberations has been a noted characteristic. Their preponderance over the ministry at Synod meetings is quite a unique ecclesiastical phenomenon. This harks back to the days, when the preservation of the Church depended in many cases on them alone. Still the oversight of the lone president-pastor was a factor, that is not to be belittled. The official organ of the Synod, the monthly "Sameiningin" under his editorship, appeared at the close of 1885 and constituted a regularly issued bishop's letter to the scattered constituents. This modest monthly has set an all-time record for Icelandic religious publications as to longevity, having well-nigh rounded the half century mark. Early vitality persists. At intervals President Bjarnason also visited the circuits on the Canadian side of the border and ministered unto them. His contagious faith inspired others. The courageous forward look against all odds and difficulties was the wholesome pioneer attitude.

Only one pastor and one church building within the confines of a whole Synod! The struggle for existence might well have seemed to require every effort that could be put forth. The homes were primitive and bare, and in most instances it required the combined efforts of all the members of a family to keep the wolf from the door. Still there was in this period constant planning to build churches, to secure ministers of the gospel, and to provide for a future in which the spiritual values of life should be safeguarded. This could not be traced to the pressure of an aggressive organization, but appeared as a spontaneous phenomenon in every community. The church in the home was the nucleus about which the hearts of men were warmed to give heed to the spiritual side of life. The young synod was an incentive and a promise that by combined effort much could be done.

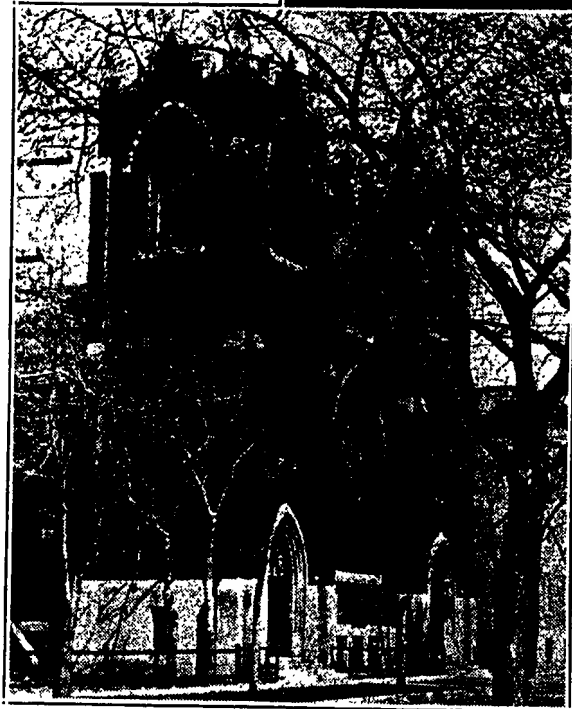
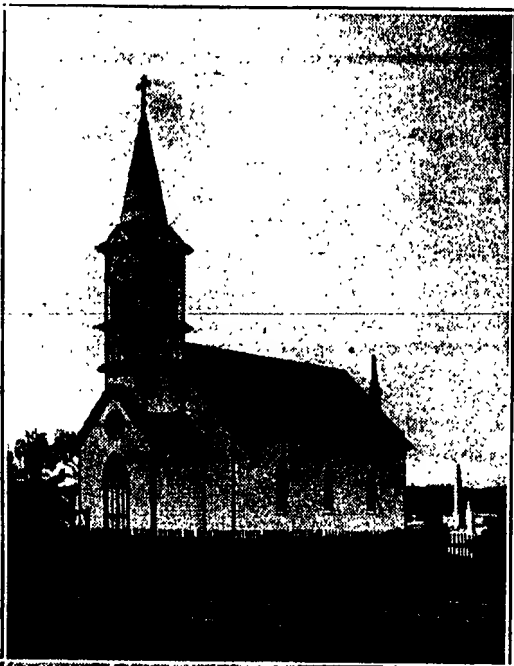
FIRST FIVE YEARS

Results were forthcoming. If we survey the first five years of the Synod's history, we note that the number of ministers has increased to four, the number of congregations

from twelve to twenty-three, church buildings from one to seven, and total membership from 2,300 to 4,341. Two of the men added to the ministry belonged to the early immigration to America and received their college training here. The Rev. F. J. Bergmann was the first. He had taken two years of theology at the University in Norway, with one year at the Mt. Airy Seminary in Philadelphia. He was graduated from the latter institution in the spring of 1886, and was ordained by the Ministerium of Pennsylvania after graduation. He accepted a call from the congregations in Pembina county, Dakota, residing at Gardar. At the Synod meeting in 1886 he was elected vice-president of the body, a position he held until 1899. A man of exceptional ability, he was destined to become one of the most influential leaders of his people, both through literary attainments and scholarship and outstanding ability as a pastor and organizer. The second recruit to the ministry was the Rev. N. S. Thorlaksson, a brother of the pioneer pastor. He took his full theological course at the University of Norway, and then accepted a call to the congregations in Lyon and Lincoln counties, Minnesota. He was the first pastor to receive ordination in the Icelandic Synod. During his long ministry he has served in many important capacities, as secretary, vice-president, and president. He is now the oldest living pastor of the Synod, who in robust retirement enjoys the well-earned universal esteem of his people, having built securely and well with a spiritual and intellectual insight that is rare. Such men were worthy additions to the noble fellowship of the pioneer pastors. They honored their calling by seeking the best training available, and then unhesitatingly offered themselves to share the lot of the pioneers. Iceland also was a recruiting ground for ministers. In 1887 the Rev. Magnus J. Skaptasen was called from a charge in the homeland to New Iceland. A rugged viking physically and intellectually he fitted well into a pioneer setting, but found it irksome to tread the path of orthodoxy and soon went over to the Unitarians. Hafsteinn Petursson cand. theol. was a further addition from Iceland in 1890. He accepted a call from the congregations in the Municipality of Argyle, where he served a short but successful pastorate. He later organized a church in Winnipeg and withdrew from the Synod, not however, because of doctrinal divergence.

Two common major problems emerged in these first years. One was the source of ministerial supply. The other was incipient religious controversy that cut deeper than the first division in New Iceland. As to the first, it had been hoped that the Church of Iceland would be the main source for obtaining ministers. The President of the Synod entrusted

**VIKUR
CHURCH**
Mountain, N. D.



**FIRST
LUTHERAN
CHURCH**
Winnipeg, Man.

the Dean of the Theological Faculty in Reykjavik and another personal friend in the Icelandic ministry with authority to secure suitable candidates for the work in America. Furthermore he made a trip to Iceland for the same purpose in 1889, but the result was negative. In his annual message the following year he states it as his deliberate opinion that in the future the Synod must depend on securing ministers trained in America, a policy that has in the main been pursued ever since. The soundness of this conclusion may possibly be adjudged from the fact that since that day not a single minister from Iceland has permanently cast his lot with the Synod, and practically the same applies in other groups.

The second major problem that became acute during this period has continued throughout the years. It is the problem of religious controversy and opposition. First there was a rather crude and sensational opposition in Winnipeg, quite strangely under Presbyterian auspices. It did not deserve to be taken seriously, but it caused a tempest for the time being. Soon it passed off and was forgotten. The second discord was of a more serious and continuing nature. The American Unitarian Association planted a mission among the Icelanders in Winnipeg. It involved a real struggle to maintain even one organization within the Icelandic group. Hence an extraneous propaganda to divide the forces naturally stirred the waters and raised new problems. The situation became still more sensitive when one of the ministers of the Lutheran Synod went over to the opposition. The movement was resented as a subsidized effort to weaken a young synod that was trying to stand on its own feet. A permanent division religiously was henceforth established within the Icelandic groups in America. In many ways religious controversies may help to stiffen the lines and stress fidelity to one's own organization, but unfortunately they also carry with them almost invariably bitter personal animosities that are not conducive to a wholesome spiritual atmosphere. The problem of ameliorating this is ever present.

The trend of development in the Synod in its early years seems to have been in the direction of a stricter confessionalism. Many factors were potent in bringing it into more definite alignment with the Lutheran Church in America. The Synod, however, has always retained its distinctiveness in restricting its confessional basis as a Lutheran body to Luther's Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession instead of the whole Book of Concord. Two reasons have predominated in establishing and maintaining this status: One, that these are the only universally recognized confessions

of the Lutheran Church. The other, the impropriety of accepting as a confessional basis a large volume, which even very few ministers master in their studies. There has throughout the years developed a growing antipathy to a legalistic conception of confessional subscription.

THE LAST DECADE OF THE CENTURY

This was in many respects a period of most vigorous growth and activity. In spite of the loss of five congregations through the Unitarian defection, the number of congregations in the Synod had increased at the close of the year 1900 to thirty-two from twenty-two at the beginning of the decade. Home Mission activities were particularly flourishing. The resident pastors made many missionary trips to scattered communities. The new American trained accessions to the ministry served their apprenticeship very largely in the Home Mission field, in most instances both before and after ordination. There was also much progress within the established congregations; no less than thirteen churches being erected. Sunday Schools and Young People's Leagues made good progress. A joint organization of the latter was formed in 1898, consisting of seven local leagues. In the Icelandic Church there had been much dependence on the home in regard to the religious guidance of youth. The homes felt responsible and sought to teach the elements of the Christian faith. Remnants of this have persisted and have proved most valuable assets in maintaining and extending the church and spiritual interests. It is no depreciation of newer technique to note that the wholesale withdrawal of homes from making religious and cultural contributions and the handing over of the training of youth almost entirely to outside organizations and institutions, has in the Icelandic group as elsewhere constituted a most serious problem. Some retracing of steps seems highly desirable.

Possibly the crowning characteristic of these years was the growing literary activity of the leaders. There was the official monthly "Sameiningin" under able editorship of President Bjarnason. He is recognized for his literary pre-eminence by all who are competent to judge. His collection of sermons for the Church Year belongs to this period. Many of his lectures are masterpieces. His translations are unique. The second major literary personality was the Rev. F. J. Bergmann. For thirteen years he edited the annual "Aldamot", published by the ministers of the Synod. This was but a beginning to a continued and distinguished literary and journalistic career. The prophetic note and the cultural standard of such leaders gave them a hearing accorded to few. They were ably sup-

ported by the other pastors, who also made important contributions. Lethargy was prevalent in the Church of Iceland. The free and open discussion of religious and current trends was so new and refreshing as to arrest attention. As many of the messages were neither mild nor soft-spoken, they aroused both indignation and approval in many quarters. It must ever challenge admiration how hard-pressed pioneer pastors in the midst of a multitude of labors, could find time and energy to throw themselves into such literary activity and set up such high standards. It was a stirring of the deep that profoundly affected the life of the young Synod and aroused the Church of Iceland. It raised the self-respect of the Icelanders in America. Creditable Sunday School papers were edited by the Rev. B. B. Jonsson and the Rev. N. S. Thorlaksson successively.



REV. K. K. OLAFSON
President of the Synod since 1923

III. AFTER THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

AFTER the turn of the century new problems are coming to the fore. So far there had been no difficulty as to language. The work had all been carried on in Icelandic. The generation which had grown up in the new surroundings was almost without exception so well versed in the language of the fathers that the ministrations of the Church in that medium were entirely acceptable to all. A continuing immigration contributed to this end. The unfortunate division between the generations, which has constituted such a serious problem in the foreign language group in America, had still been precluded. The postponement of the difficulty was in itself a partial solution. After that the barrier of language and the cleavage of interests could never be so complete between the groups. The second third of a century of the Icelandic settlements in America has naturally made the use of English in the work of the Synod increasingly urgent. The bi-lingual church is the result. There is much variance in different communities as to the proportions between the languages. Both over-zealous propaganda for anglicizing and pur-blind adherence to the Icelandic have had their inning. The happy medium is frequently hard to attain. With both languages on a par in the work of the church, that atmosphere is created in which the matter can be considered with greater equanimity. Culturally and spiritually there is tremendous value in maintaining a contact with and an understanding of the racial heritage and language of the land of origin. Actually this attitude finds increasingly heavy sledding as time passes. With high pressure methods out of the way, Christian common sense and forbearance find the happiest solution.

INTERNAL CONTROVERSY

At the Synod meeting in 1901 the Rev. F. J. Bergmann delivered a lecture entitled, "The Letter and the Spirit", that was destined to lead to important developments. Read to-day apart from the emotional stress of the former period, it seems a very moderate expression of a less dogmatic conception of biblical inspiration than the traditional. All of its positions could be duplicated to-day in the statements of men prominent in world Lutheranism. But at the time it caused a considerable stir and opposition, resulting in an extended controversy. One factor that helped to emphasize the change involved was the former rock-ribbed conservatism of the Rev. Bergmann. The Synod had before experienced the sensitive

character of an internal controversy in a small organization. History repeated and augmented itself. As the fires of controversy increased with such powerful personalities involved, it became increasingly difficult to preserve a proper emotional calm and to avoid personal clashes. The ardor of battle led to extreme positions on both sides. The chasm widened between the other leaders of the Synod under President Bjarnason's strong conduction and the Rev. Bergmann, resulting in the almost inevitable effect of religious controversy in fortifying both sides in their positions. In the main the issues revolved about the doctrine of inspiration and the meaning of confessional subscription.



REV. R. MARTEINSSON

Principal, Jon Bjarnason Academy

There was great turmoil within the churches in many localities, the layity ranging itself in opposing camps as well as the pastors. With the passing years the tension increased from one meeting of the Synod to the next, dwarfing all other matters that came up for consideration. The Rev. Bergmann's removal to Winnipeg from his charge in North Dakota to become the Synod's professor at Wesley College, his later pastorate of the Icelandic Tabernacle Church that was a rival of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, and his editorship of the monthly "Bleidablik" in which he promulgated his views, all had their influence in complicating the situation. Furthermore the attitude of leaders in the Church of Iceland helped to strengthen Bergmann's position. The clash came at the Synod meeting in Winnipeg in 1909. Opposing resolutions were presented, no mediation proved possible, and the Bergmann faction finding itself in a minority bolted the meeting. The Synod interpreted its own action to the effect that no one had been expelled. The minority felt that their views had been proscribed and they as well. This resulted in the resignation of the Rev. Bergmann from the Synod and the withdrawal of some eight or nine congregations from its fellowship. Only the one pastor was involved. This caused a great deal of bitterness; the splitting of congregations, and the resort to the secular courts in one instance. Where opposing churches

resulted side by side in the same community, the stir of battle was intense and prolonged. In an atmosphere of that kind more heat than light is liable to be generated.

SUMMARY

During the years of controversy there was a great deal of vitality in the church life, although it was focused excessively on the combat. There were valuable additions to the ministry, the number of pastors now reaching fourteen. There were no less than three ordinations during the year of the crisis. The baptized membership at the peak of this period was 7,214 with 4,656 confirmed. The Young People's Leagues continued active, holding their annual joint meetings in connection with the Synodical conventions. Sunday School workers also convened annually. An adaptation of the Common Service of the Lutheran Church in America was approved for the churches. The publication of an annual was resumed under the title "Aramot". This continued for some six years under the editorship of the Rev. B. B. Jonsson. People were definitely church conscious, and church affairs held the centre of the stage among the Icelanders in America.

NEW PRESIDENT AND THE JUBILEE

In 1908 occurred a change in the presidency of the Synod. The Rev. Jon Bjarnason withdrew, and the Rev. Bjorn B. Jonsson was elected in his place. At the time he was pastor at Minneota, Minnesota, being called in 1914 to succeed the Rev. Bjarnason in Winnipeg. With great ability as a parliamentary and executive, as well as an inherited and cultivated literary strain, he proved a very valuable helmsman during this trying period. For thirteen years he held the presidency and acquitted himself with great credit. At the close of that important service he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, belonging to the Norwegian Lutheran Church. The celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Synod in 1910 under his leadership was a marked success. One feature was an announcement from Thiel College, Pennsylvania, that the revered patriarch of the Synod, the Rev. Jon Bjarnason, had been honored with the Doctor of Divinity degree. A jubilee fund of \$5,000 was raised for Home Missions and a most attractive and creditable memorial publication issued, containing much important material relating to the history of the Synod. These were favorable auspices for the years ahead.

AFTERMATH OF THE STRUGGLE

The situation was now changed. While controversy continued, it was not internal but against outside opposition.

The Synod was under strong attack from an able and determined source. This called for a chastened temper and the setting of one's house in order. A more irenic attitude was assumed, and with the passing years the personal bitterness that had been engendered began to fade. The groups that had left learned through experience that it was quite a more difficult thing to build up independently than to dissent from within. Their pastoral supply was from Iceland, and while some very able men responded, they all went back to their native land in a few years. After the death of their intrepid leader, the Rev. F. J. Bergmann, in 1918, the church served by him in Winnipeg



DR. B. J. BRANDSON
Chairman, Bethel Directorate

broke up into factions, the right wing being absorbed by the First Lutheran Church, belonging to the Synod, and the left wing joining hands with the Unitarians. Along the same lines was the outcome in other communities. What had been a three-party division religiously was reduced to a two-party alignment. As a result of the amalgamation between the left wing and the Unitarians, there came into existence the "United Conference of Icelandic Churches", offering harbor for the same latitude of opinion as prevails in many state churches, without alienating the support of the American Unitarian Association. Of late years there has been little direct controversy between these two opposing church organizations, both seeking to set forth their positions more objectively and less controversially. Furthermore a generation has grown up that is entirely unfamiliar with the controversies carried on in the past in Icelandic, due to the barrier of language. This tends toward a considerable breaking up alignments and leaving the situation in a more fluid state.

IV. SOME MAJOR ACTIVITIES

NEW ACTIVITIES

A NEW harmony characterized the synodical meetings after the cleavage of 1909. The energies released from pre-occupation with controversy, could now be used in other directions. A period of energetic and varied activity followed. A number of new congregations were organized in the Home Mission field, Foreign Missions received more extended attention, an academy was founded, an old folks' home established, new publications issued, and current situations met. The new ventures had their roots far back in the history of the Synod and require some individual elucidation for a fuller understanding.

JON BJARNASON ACADEMY

At the second meeting of the Synod the Rev. Jon Bjarnason had given the sum of one hundred dollars as the nest-egg of a fund to establish a Christian school within the confines of the Synod. Such a school was to foster loyalty to the Christian faith and to preserve the cultural values and language of the fathers. Thus an objective was set that never passed out of view in the years to come. Gradually additions were made to the fund, and in the nineties it was seriously proposed to make a beginning. Unfortunately the location of the school became a bone of contention between the Canadian and American groups in the Synod, each favoring its own side of the international boundary. Valuable inducements had been offered on the American side, but the majority resided in Canada and controlled the issue. For the time being the disagreement cancelled all action. As a substitute for the school the Synod in 1901 established a professorship at Wesley College in Winnipeg and in 1905 a second one at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. The Rev. F. J. Bergmann was the incumbent of the former, Prof. Magnus Magnusson of the latter. That these were temporary arrangements, not departures from the original aim, was clearly stated in synodical resolutions. Both chairs were vacated in 1909. At the Synod meeting in 1913 a decision was finally reached to establish an academy in Winnipeg at the beginning of the ensuing school year. The academy remained unnamed for one year, but the death of Dr. Bjarnason occurring in the meantime, his name was as a matter of course given to the school. The Rev. Runolfur Marteinsson, who at the time was professor at Wesley College, was called to the principalship and accepted. He was a nephew of Dr. Bjarnason,

and had a most noble record of service within the Synod. He has been identified with the school throughout most of its history, and upon him as no other individual has rested the burden of its welfare and continuance. During an interim of the Rev. Marteinsson's service, the principalship was held by the Rev. H. J. Leo, a distinguished school man and a pillar of strength intellectually and spiritually. For many years the Academy struggled along without a home of its own, but has of recent years been housed in a modest structure built for the purpose. During the early years the students were almost exclusively of Icelandic descent, and the two main aims of the institution to promote Christianity and the Icelandic language and culture, could be adhered to in practice. In the course of time there has been a reversal of the proportion between students of Icelandic origin and other nationalities. The Icelandic contingent has become a small minority, and the demand for Icelandic has ceased. The Christian atmosphere and influence, together with efficient teaching, have continued to recommend the Academy. The attendance has at the highest passed beyond the hundred mark. It is at present about seventy.

The small constituency of the Academy has from the beginning made its financial support most precarious. Before the Great War the prospects seemed more promising, but many large pledges could not be redeemed on account of changed conditions and deflated fortunes. As this is the only Lutheran educational institution in Manitoba, it was hoped that its future might be assured by interesting other Lutheran groups in its maintainance and in supplying students. In the twenties there seemed good prospects of such continued co-operation, as both the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America and the United Lutheran Church in America supported professorships for a time. The former discontinued after two years. The latter after the present depression had made its full effect felt in its finances. This has left the school at the present in a desperate situation in spite of the heroic sacrifices of the teachers.

BETHEL OLD FOLKS HOME

The founding of an old folks home had its origin also in the sphere of Dr. Bjarnason's intimate personal influence. The Ladies Aid Society of the First Lutheran Church had had the matter under favorable consideration for a number of years, the original suggestion coming from Mrs. Bjarnason. They came to the conclusion that such an institution was best safeguarded under synodical initiative. They officially broached the matter, pledging their interest and support. For some



REV. EGILL H. FAFNIS

And the Churches of his Pastorate.

1. at Baldur. 2. at Grund. 3. at Bru. 4. at Glenboro.

years ways and means were considered and an effort made to launch the institution under the combined auspices of various Icelandic groups. This came to nothing, and the matter was again entirely in the hands of the Synod. The venture was finally made in the spring of 1915 in a rented home in Winnipeg. From the very beginning the project filled such a need and met with such a response, that its success was assured. Later on in the same year it was removed to Gimli on the Lake Winnipeg Beach. At first a frame structure was acquired that filled the needs temporarily. Later a substantial brick building was secured. This was enlarged in 1928 by an addition costing ten thousand dollars through the beneficence of the well known electrical inventor and manufacturer, Mr. C. H. Thordarson of Chicago. The home has been very fortunate in the personnel of administration both within the institution and on its Board. The matrons, Miss Eleonora Julius and Mrs. Asdis Hinriksson, and the steward, Mr. O. W. Olafson, are gratefully remembered for their long and honorable services. The last two years the home has been under the efficient direction of Miss Inga Johnson, a trained nurse of much experience. Dr. B. J. Brandson, as the head of the Board, has rendered the home invaluable service, and been ably seconded by his fellow members. Some forty-five aged people find shelter in the home, and there always is a long waiting list. An endowment of twenty thousand dollars has been provided, but continuous support from the public is also required.

FOREIGN MISSIONS

Interest in Foreign Missions had not been developed within the Church of Iceland, when the immigration to America set in. The first definite espousal of this cause within an Icelandic church was brought about through the efforts of Dr. Bjarnason in the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg. His efforts began to bear fruit in the first years of the present century. A scurrilous attack on missions had been made in a publication in Iceland. Dr. Bjarnason felt that the only effective reply was to give added impetus to intelligent interest and participation in this noble Christian endeavor. Through the Young People's League of his church a spontaneous mission consciousness was aroused, that inevitably led to contributions to the cause. The contagion of interest spread, and in 1904 the matter was taken up officially by the Synod. Ever since it has been recognized as an essential Christian interest and activity. Subsequent to this, interest in missions has developed within the Church of Iceland. As a spontaneous movement it has continued to grow with a greater promise for the future. That this has at least indirectly

been affected by the influence of Dr. Bjarnason's initiative and subsequent events in America, cannot be regarded as problematical. The Synod's first financial contributions to the cause went to the support of native boys in a Lutheran school in India. Later a son of the Rev. N. S. Thorlaksson volunteered to prepare himself for work as a foreign missionary. Since 1910 the small contributions of the Synod to this particular Christian activity have been made in connection first with the preparation and later the missionary activity in Japan of this brother, the Rev. S. O. Thorlaksson and his wife. They work under the auspices of the United Lutheran Church in America, and are now in their third term of service. They and their work are rated highly by the Board under which they carry on. Annual reports are sent by them to the Synod, and they have spent parts of their years of furlough in visiting its churches and arousing interest in the cause. The yearly contribution has never exceeded twelve hundred dollars.

OTHER PROJECTS

Home missionary activity among the scattered Icelandic groups on this continent, have been the Synod's most distinctive work. Further reference to that will be deferred to the last chapter.

Three major publication ventures belong to the second half of the Synod's history, in addition to the ordinary projects. The first was the issuing of Dr. Bjarnason's classical Icelandic translation of the historical novel "Ben Húf". Next was the attractive and invaluable "Memorial" published after Dr. Bjarnason's demise in 1914, containing articles of high literary and historical value. The third was a new hymnal, replacing the hymnal of the Church of Iceland. This was published in 1915. It embodied the liturgy of the Synod and forms for ministerial acts.

The official organ of the Synod, "Sameiningin", has continued as a purely Icelandic publication. The following have served in editorial capacity, the order being in accordance with length of service: Dr. Jon Bjarnason, Dr. B. B. Jonsson, the Rev's. G. Guttormsson, K. K. Olafson, R. Marteinson, J. A. Sigurdsson, and N. S. Thorlaksson. The last named served as a substitute for Dr. Jonsson for a number of months in 1920. The present editorial board consists of three men: the Rev's. K. K. Olafson, G. Guttormsson, and R. Marteinson.

Sunday School literature in Icelandic has been provided from time to time, but the demand has so decreased that such publications have been suspended. The Sunday School

work is becoming completely aligned with American and Canadian standards.

The synodical organization of Young People's Leagues became inactive during the war and is only now being revived.

The Lutheran Soldiers' and Sailors' Welfare was very active both in the United States and Canada during the great war. The churches of the Synod participated. Dr. B. B. Jonsson was the efficient head of the combined Lutheran effort in Canada.



REV. and MRS. O. S. THORLAKSSON
Missionaries to Japan

V. APPROACHING THE HALF CENTURY

NEW ADMINISTRATIONS

IN 1921 the Rev. N. S. Thorlaksson succeeded to the presidency of the Synod, when Dr. Jonsson withdrew. He served for two years. His influence was wholesome and stabilizing. He possessed the universal confidence of the membership, and he displayed the same mature judgment in this official capacity that had characterized his long ministry. When he was relieved of office in 1923, it was largely due to the feeling that the burden should rest upon younger shoulders. The Rev. K. K. Olafson, then pastor at Mountain, North Dakota, was elected his successor, and has continued in office up to the present. From 1925 to 1930 he was pastor at Glenboro, Manitoba, and since then at Seattle, Washington. During the last two years he has devoted considerable time to the Home Mission field of the Synod. The present secretary of the Synod is the Rev. Johann Bjarnason, and the treasurer Mr. S. O. Bjerring.

HOME MISSIONS

From now on the work of the Synod has necessarily consisted rather in fostering the activities already shouldered than in taking up new projects. There has been no possibility of going beyond the Home Mission field already staked. The effort has been to mete out the forces available in men and means to the most urgent needs. Truth requires the admission that there is a constant disproportion between the needs and the resources to meet them. The attempt has been to reach the main settlements and as many of the scattered groups as possible. Much of this has been sowing without hope of reaping as far as organization gains are concerned, for in many places there cannot be much hope of permanency for the work. Such effort, however, reaches many that have a lingering affection for the Christian influences of their youth in the Icelandic Church and are more responsive to a messenger from that source than elsewhere. It must have in view simply the cause of Christ among men rather than any statistical advantage for one's own group. Possibly more of that highly Christian attitude and emphasis is one of the great needs of the day. The true missionary in any field should be willing to sacrifice any possible outward gain for his own division of the Church, if it furthers general advantage for the Christian cause. Nowhere is this more urgent than in the work of Home Missions. No longer can we regard our responsibilities as limited simply to those of our own racial

stock. In the exigencies of the work of the Icelandic Synod a phenomenon has developed that is noteworthy. There are congregations that have developed and maintained quite efficient work with a minimum of pastoral service, due to consecrated work on the part of the laity. Instances could be named where the standard of churchmanship and Christian training in such communities has been up to the average of our best pastoral charges. This may indicate the possibilities latent, if the universal priesthood of believers was fully translated into Christian practice.

MINISTERIAL LOSSES

The Synod has during the last decade met with a serious loss in its ministerial forces. Whether the loss is occasioned by the deaths of pastors or by calls to other fields, a small synod requiring knowledge of another language besides English on the part of its pastors has often a serious problem in filling the gaps. Especially is this true in a period of depression, when both churches and pastors are under financial pressure. Then unfortunate interims in pastoral service are likely to happen, and in fact do. Three men in the active ministry have during this period left the Icelandic Synod for other fields, and another group of three has been called in death from successful pastorates. A seventh pastor can only give part of his time to the Synod, and a young man from one of our churches received ordination in another Lutheran synod because his own synod offered him no call. The three pastors going to other fields were the Rev's. F. Hallgrímsson, K. Simundson, and C. J. Olson. The Rev. Hallgrímsson had been the efficient secretary of the Synod for twenty years, when he accepted a call to become second pastor at the Cathedral in Reykjavik, Iceland. The three called in death were: the Rev's. Adam Thorgrímsson, H. J. Leo, and J. A. Sigurdsson. All were exceptionally able men with a record of pre-eminent service. The first two were in the prime of life, the third more advanced in age, but still in vigorous service. All had a decided poetical and literary bend, and had also in that field made some notable contributions. The Rev. Sigurdsson was the most prolific, and his poetical and literary ventures were very significant. He was very prominent in the councils of the Synod as well as in the Icelandic Patriotic League. He was president of the League at the time of his death in 1933. Such outstanding losses are not easily repaired.

RELATION TO OTHER LUTHERANS IN AMERICA

The Icelandic Synod made contacts with other Lutherans in America from its very inception. On arriving in America,

Some of the present day ministers
of the
ICELANDIC LUTHERAN SYNOD



JOHANN BJARNASON



G. GUTTORMSSON



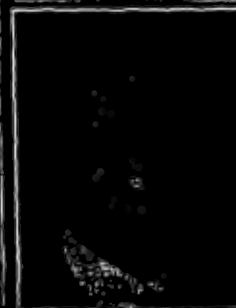
S. S. CHRISTOPHERSON



B. THEO. SIGURDSSON



H. SIGMAR



V. J. EYLANDS



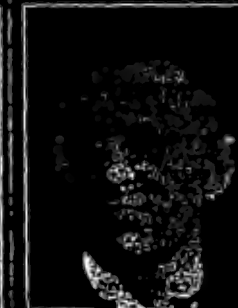
B. A. BJARNASON



S. OLAFSSON



J. FRIDRIKSSON



G. P. JOHNSON

the Icelandic immigration met with a most cordial reception from their brethren in the faith, wherever contact was made. In pre-synodical history the conviction appears that the Icelandic group should line up with a Lutheran organization already on the ground. Young men sought their education at American Lutheran institutions, and later entered the ministry of the Synod, a condition that has prevailed throughout its history. Helpfulness and friendliness was the one attitude encountered, and this has continued up to the present. It is not strange, therefore, that the question of officially joining a larger Lutheran organization was early faced within the Synod and has always been near the surface. In the nineties the Rev. F. J. Bergmann, ably seconded by such influential men as the Rev. J. A. Sigurdsson and Rev. B. B. Jonsson, agitated for union with the General Council of the Lutheran Church, now a constituent element of the United Lutheran Church in America. For many years this remained a major issue. Although the majority regarded the union inadvisable, still it was tacitly and explicitly admitted that in due time the Synod would inevitably affiliate with a larger organization. As more and more of the work has been carried on in English and as the trend in church life everywhere has been in the direction of amalgamation and co-operation, the isolation of the Synod could not fail to continue a concern of many of its members. The Synod nominally joined the National Lutheran Council and affiliated itself in full sympathy with the Lutheran World Convention movement, but is too small an organization to maintain such a relationship except as a part of a larger whole.

The question of joining one of the large Lutheran groups was sporadically discussed, and became acute again during the last few years. First it resolved itself into a dispute as to which of two organizations was more acceptable to the Synod for meeting its present needs: The United Lutheran Church in America or the American Lutheran Conference. Soon the question narrowed down to joining the United Lutheran Church or not. The matter was very thoroughly discussed. The proposal was strongly supported and strongly opposed. The issue came to a vote two years ago and was decisively defeated. As interest in the matter was intense and convictions most decided, it was feared that the outcome might lead to a crisis. Fortunately this fear was entirely unwarranted. Evidently the lesson had been learned that in a democratic church organization men can and should strive earnestly for what they consider wise and expedient, and still take defeat with good grace. It does not require anyone to be unfaithful to an honest conviction, for by trying to persuade others of its rightness the proper means of winning

support for it have been exhausted. Furthermore no one should regard an issue as finally decided unless he becomes convinced that it has been settled right. Such should be the technique of loyalty.

The matter of the future relationship of the Synod is still with us, and must be definitely faced in the future. We hope to be able to carry on for many years to come as an Icelandic Lutheran Synod, with English predominating more and more in the work. As the national element fades, it is inevitable that we shall amalgamate more fully with others. Many of us feel that we should consciously and deliberately choose in the matter as soon as that can possibly be done without a too costly disharmony, and benefit by the enlarged outlook and responsible contact. Others feel the matter is not so urgent, and they are willing to let the issue rest indefinitely. In the meantime it is evident to all that whichever course is chosen, there is equal necessity to strive to make our work vital in every field. Only thus can we make the right Christian preparation for any eventuality. Uncertainty as to matters of organization and alignment need not stand in the way of spiritual health or vitality. With a high state of moral, spiritual, and social health, we need not fear even the ultimate break up of the small unit that we constitute. It should be our hope and prayer that we may continue as an entity till we know that the life of the organization is in no way essential to the cause of Christ. Then giving up its life, would be the Christian way of gaining a fuller life.

SOCIAL QUESTIONS

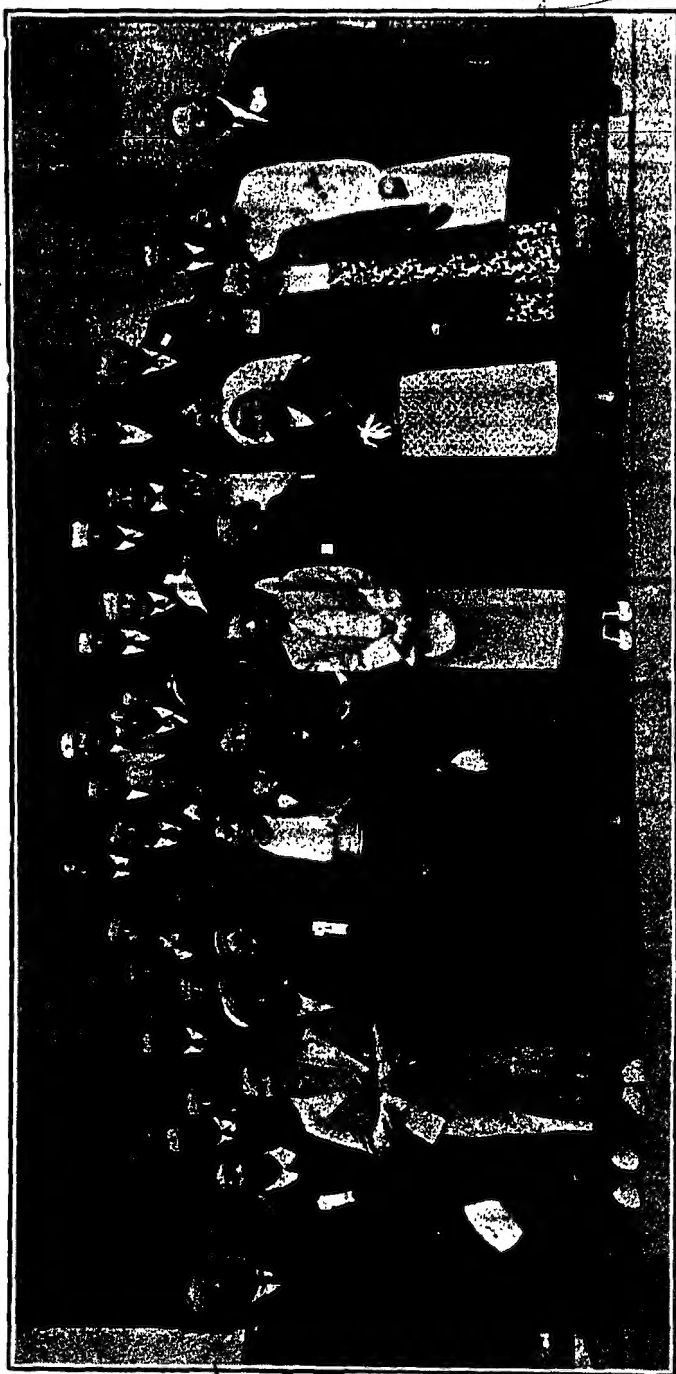
Interest in social questions has been greatly increased within the churches of recent years. This has also made itself felt within the Icelandic Synod. It has from its inception consistently placed itself on record against the exploitation of humanity through the liquor traffic and the evils of intemperance. It has become increasingly anti-war in international relations, believing that Christian friendships afford more protection than warships. In facing the other pressing issues of the day along social lines, it has realized the mission of the Church to stand for the preservation of human values and the safeguarding of personality, and to arouse men's consciences to apply the ethics of Christianity not simply in living within a system, but in shaping life and its institutions to the needs of men.

CONCLUSION

At the close of this half century of history, the Icelandic Lutheran Synod remains a very small and scattered constituency. Numbering about 6,000 confirmed members, with a

little over 2,000 additional baptized members, seventeen pastors, and fifty-three congregations, its statistics are not imposing. Furthermore these forces are dispersed over three provinces and three states, increasing greatly the difficulties of co-operation. In many respects the life of a small synod is no doubt a miniature cross-cut of the life of the Church in larger areas, indicating its problems, weaknesses, and strength. From that standpoint this short survey may possibly be of interest to some, who labor within wider horizons, as well as furthering a consciousness of our history and life on the part of our own people.

We should face the future with courage and faith. There is much in our history to make us humble and much to inspire to emulation. Our weakness in the present is overwhelming, but the strength of God can be made perfect in weakness. The younger generation is our greatest human asset. May the present increased activity among the young people of the Synod be the beginning of a powerful Christian youth movement in our midst. Under God that would give the surest promise of a bright future.



**First Convention of the Young Peoples' Association of the Icelandic Evangelical* Lutheran Synod of North America.
Held in Winnipeg, May 24 to 26, 1935.**